

Terror on Every Side

For I hear the whispering of many—
terror on every side!—
as they scheme together against me,
as they plot to take my life.

A psalm of David: Psalm 31:13

For I hear many whispering.
Terror is on every side!
“Denounce him! Let us denounce him!”
say all my close friends,
watching for my fall.
“Perhaps he will be deceived;
then we can overcome him
and take our revenge on him.”

Jeremiah 20:10

Terror on Every Side!

The Life of Jeremiah

Volume 1

By

Mark T Morgan

Chapter 1 “My Birthday”
issued as part of a weekly serialisation

Beginning 18 July 2016

Front cover: Horace Vernet, Jeremiah on the ruins of Jerusalem (1844)

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV[®] Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version[®]), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

© Mark T Morgan, 2016

Chapter 1 – My Birthday

March, 585BC

It was on my 17th birthday that I first heard – or felt – God’s voice. In those days, we seemed to have a happy extended family in Anathoth and I was welcome in it. Times are different now: no happy family, all are dead except me – the one they all hated.

It is hard not to feel nostalgic about those times, times of innocence and ignorance. I guess that is the trigger for writing this diary. It is intensely private, not even to be shared with Baruch who has written all the messages God has given to the people through me. It may never be finished, but I had to start it because of what happened today. Again, it was my birthday and again God spoke to me. Funnily enough, even after all these years of hearing his voice, it still startles me and thrills me – I could never fake it or imagine it. The burning shock of the voice of God within me; scorching but uplifting, frightening but joyous; the feeling that brings me to instant wakefulness or stops me in my tracks as I walk. And when the voice fades, the effects remain – God’s demand for action continues to burn within me¹. Yet today, once again, I was told “The Lord did not send you”. It was Johanan the son of Kareah this time², along with the other leaders of the pathetic remnants of the once great army of Judah. If only they could experience the voice of God! Then they would know I could never make it up. But they don’t believe me. No-one ever has....

If only things could have turned out differently. King Josiah was the great comfort and hope of those of us who loved the Lord, Yahweh

¹ Jeremiah 20:9

² Jeremiah 43:2

our God. Josiah, the Boy King, was probably the reason I was willing to agree when God told me his plans for my life, plans that had started before I was born³. But Josiah died, and with him died all hope that Judah might turn back to God. Memories are all I have left now, memories of a city once full of people, now sitting lonely and forlorn; memories of a family of priests who served at a temple now ground into the dust.

March, 726BC - the 13th year of King Josiah

In Judah, we never made much of birthdays. If a young man ever suggested a celebration, the older priests would always remind him sternly of the only birthday feast mentioned in our Scriptures, where Pharaoh hanged his chief baker⁴! Nevertheless, as Levites, our birthdays *were* important to us, and particularly to those of us who were destined to be priests. God had given rules about when we could start our life's work, so the date was important, even if having a party was not. My birthday was a little more special than most, because I shared a birthday with the king⁵. Was that another part of the pre-planning of God in my life? It certainly made the king very important to me, particularly his well-known search for godliness. Every year my father would tell me "Jeremiah, you are still only a young lad, too young for the work of God." But I knew how old the king was, and would sometimes ask cheekily "Does not King Josiah do the work of God?" Josiah was just 4 years older than I: he had become king when he was only 8, yet no-one doubted that he was doing the work of God. "Ah, yes," my father would reply in his rich, deep voice, "but he is only a king, while you will be a priest, acting even between the king and our omnipotent God!" My father's voice was just right for a priest – when he spoke it made

³ Jeremiah 1:5

⁴ Genesis 40:20-22

⁵ There is no evidence for this at all.

you feel as if he had all the wisdom of the ages at his disposal, and you were enveloped in the certainty of an endlessly glorious kingdom of Judah with the temple in Jerusalem at its centre and the priesthood of Aaron as Judah's guiding light. Everyone loved my father, and they loved to listen to that delightful, caressing voice. However, even before I turned 17, I was beginning to wonder about some of the murkier depths behind it.

On my 17th birthday, during our evening meal, he had reminded me as usual that I was still too young. Then, as I lay on my bed that night thinking and praying, my life's work was shown to me. If God ever speaks to you, it may be different, but for me, the word of God came like the slow start of a fire, with light and heat and the knowledge that this was something very special. I don't think there was a light in the room, it was more as if the light was inside me and that I could feel it. After a few seconds of this growing feeling of a presence within me, the voice came. Expansive, vast, uncontained, it seemed to fill my being, threatening to burst me open. Yet it was also calm, tranquil almost, as my God revealed his long-held plans for me:

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

I'm not really sure whether I responded out loud or whether I spoke in my mind. How do you speak to a presence that fills you with sound, yet doesn't seem to make a sound? I had no doubt whose the voice was: “Ah, Lord GOD! I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.” My father's words came very easily to me despite my feeling of irritation earlier in the day when he had used them. Again, the voice of God:

“Do not say, ‘I am only a youth’;
for to all to whom I send you, you shall go,
and whatever I command you, you shall speak.
Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,
declares the LORD.”

It didn't seem strange to have God announcing who he was at the end of this speech. Rather, it was comforting, despite the surge of light within me, the surge of a white-hot flame filled with power and infinite purity. It was an experience I was to become very familiar with. Whenever God announced his name – Yahweh – the light inside me burned hotter and brighter, and the power in the voice seemed to swell. This was the great creator, the living God, speaking to me – within me – how could it be possible? These things didn't happen in modern times, yet here I was experiencing the voice of God; hearing a challenging command that came with a reassurance of the presence of God in my life! Then suddenly everything changed. Instead of a voice inside me, there was now a vision clear as crystal in my eyes, as a hand which I somehow knew to be the hand of God, came shining from the darkness of the night and touched my mouth. Instantly I thought of Isaiah, the great prophet who, more than a century ago, had volunteered to be God's messenger⁶. His complaint of unclean lips had been swept away when they were touched by a burning coal taken from the very altar of God; even his sins had been taken away in that searing second. I had complained about being too young. Could the hand of God fix this also? But no, he declared that instead his words had been put within my mouth. The words of God – in *my* mouth? This was what I had often longed for – words of wisdom and certainty from God. It is strange to think back on this now, now that the

⁶ Isaiah 6

certainty of God's message has brought me such trouble and suffering over the years, but if I had to choose again, I would still want his words within me, leading me as he wills it.

The voice had not finished; the sting in the tail was yet to come. At the tender age of 17, I was told:

“See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to break down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.”

Humility was never my strong point, but even so, this left me utterly bewildered: how could *I* possibly be set over nations and kingdoms? How could I pluck up and break down? Even the great king Josiah was only set over one nation, one kingdom. I was a priest – or I would be once I grew up – not a prophet or a king. How could this ever be? And did I want it anyway? I remember clearly the jumble of my thoughts as the vision faded and the voice left me. The darkness closed around me again and there was nothing left to show that God had ever been there in the room with me, touching me, changing me. Except, that is, for the burning urge that remained, the urge to do something, to read, to study, to talk, to pray. But how could I pray when God had been there inside? My prayers were made to a God who was outside, a God who never replied to the jumbled thoughts I often chose to call ‘prayer’. Would I ever be able to pray in an ordinary way again when I had actually talked with God? But I must do something, and sleep was impossible. Maybe it would be best to think and try to remember all that God had said, or even write it all down. In the end, that was what I did, and so started my habit of writing down the words God spoke to me. It was a good habit and most of the time I followed it. Only in my most stubborn times did I avoid the writing, and even

those messages God ultimately forced me to write. Fighting with God never works – he always wins in the end. I suppose I am glad about that too, now.

Ten minutes of writing completed the job. I had no difficulty remembering exactly what God had said, and no difficulty understanding that this was a message no-one would ever believe. Apocalyptic for me, but apocryphal to everyone else. How could I ever convince my father? It wasn't hard to imagine his words and the deep, somewhat mocking tone of voice as well – “My son, you are too young for God to use you in that way. Think of Moses – 80 years old before God could use him. Think of Elisha – bald as an egg before he could become God's prophet. I had to wait for God's time, and you must too.” My father always had examples at his fingertips – but he always chose the ones he wanted and ignored the others. What about David, or Joash, or even King Josiah himself? Why ignore the young boy Samuel when God hadn't? But all the logic in the world wasn't going to help and I knew it.

So what should I do? I spent the rest of the night wrestling with that problem. Sleep was still impossible; my feeling of a need to do something still overwhelmed me. But what? This had been the word of God. I couldn't ignore it just because no-one would believe me. Yet what to do anyway? The word of the Lord to me had only been information; a sort of job description and notice of appointment, but without a starting date or anything specific to work on. However, if God's spirit was urging me to do something...all I could think of was to do some research. I knew that once upon a time there had been scrolls of the books of Moses, but generations of evil kings had seen these destroyed or lost. What could I research? The night was long and filled with troubled thoughts before I slipped out of the house a little before dawn; eager to watch the sun rising in hope that a light would shine in my

heart too, showing me which way to turn. If only God would set up a test as he had with Aaron – selecting his priest by causing a dead stick to sprout and grow almonds so that everyone would recognise God’s selection. If only...but everyone knows that God simply doesn’t do things like that in modern times.

It was a beautiful sunrise, complete with a wonderful dance of shimmering clouds in ever changing shapes and hues. A long thin cloud with strange protrusions had caught my attention, since it almost seemed to look like Aaron’s almond rod, having grown leaves and fruit and then the voice came:

“Jeremiah, what do you see?”

I answered, “I see an almond branch”, and God told me that I had seen well for he was watching over his word to make sure it happened. If you know Hebrew, you will know that our words for ‘almond’ and ‘watching’ are very similar. It was a play on words. I was learning unexpected things about the God I worshipped. But what did it mean? God watching words? Which words? My confusion was pretty much complete as I dazedly watched the almond branch cloud slowly lose its shape as it moved across the sky to the north. I remembered the prophet Amos had been asked about what he saw when God showed him a plumb line⁷. Amos had been given many messages of judgement on Israel’s neighbours – if I were to be a prophet to the nations, maybe these were the words God would be watching over to fulfil. I must go to Jerusalem and read the words of Amos again. One of the advantages of being from a priestly family is that it is easy to get access to the scrolls of the prophets, even the prophets from Israel like Amos. From

⁷ Amos 7:8 - A plumb line is a string with a weight on the end (called a plumb). When the string is held up it will form a vertical line and can be used to check that walls or posts are truly vertical.

memory, there were messages against Damascus, the Philistines, Tyre and Edom, the Ammonites and... and maybe some others. The consistent theme of 3's and 4's made them much easier to remember, but had those prophecies been fulfilled or not? Did God still need to watch over those words or had the work already been done? There was a beauty to me in the thought of God speaking against nations and carefully watching his words as they flew like a burning arrow to the target – punishing the enemies of Israel. It was a simple mistake to make. Being appointed a prophet to the nations made me think I would not be a prophet to my own people. Little did I know that it was my own people that would make my life a misery for so many years; my own people who would, just like the other nations, be the target of God's fiery arrows of prophecy.

As the 'almond branch' cloud diffused to the north a sudden change came over the sky. Instead of clouds, all I could see to the north was what had the appearance of the lip of a giant cauldron superimposed on the clouds, filling the whole horizon, its seething and boiling contents tipping terrifyingly toward me. Again the voice:

“What do you see?”

Fear made my voice crack a little as I replied, “I see a boiling pot, facing away from the north.” Then, as I struggled to fully absorb the words of the burning voice, God explained to me what this vision meant. A disaster was approaching from the north, an unspeakable catastrophe; all the nations of the north attacking God's holy city. The Lord would declare his judgements against Judah and Jerusalem because they had worshipped other gods.

And I was the one who was to tell my people.

My blood ran cold at the thought; I cringed inwardly at the idea of being the young upstart who told an entire city – an entire nation – that their worship was false! My father.... But...surely not even my father was as important as my maker? And all the ungodly people in Jerusalem certainly needed this message; there was no question about that! Still the voice of the Lord continued, insistently telling me that I must get ready for this work and promising to give me the mental strength I needed to keep going whatever the difficulties. He spoke with unforgettable word pictures:

“I make you today a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you.”

Another repeated feature of the words of God was put plainly before me here, but I was too overcome and too naive to notice it at the time: his simplest messages often include the most shocking, dangerous, complex or utterly overwhelming ideas. “Against...the priests”. I was to be a priest; my father was a priest; my uncles were priests; some of my cousins were priests; my whole family were priests. Yet God’s word was going to make me fight against them. Armed with the experience I now have of the words of Yahweh, this would have rung alarm bells immediately, but in those days I was ignorant of his ways – too ignorant, really.